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ABSTRACT

The new emphasis on combining language and culture teaching finds all teachers busy updating and improving their materials. However, feedback on how successful they are in their attempts is limited. Revealing insights into the image of Germany held by high school students can be gained from the 1974 and 1975 essays, written by applicants for the travel-study trips, on the following Landeskunde topics: (1) You would like to spend two months somewhere in West Germany. Which place would you pick, for what reasons, and what would you like to do there? (2) Do you think that there are essential differences between German and American youth? What is your answer based on? While one-sided, uniform responses occurred to the first topic, indicating the existence of strong cultural-geographical cliches, the reactions to the second topic were more varied, indicating a realistic grasp of contemporary life. Reasons are presented for the popularity of the cliches and recommendations offered for dealing with them without abandoning altogether the "good old Germany" image of folklore and regional attractions. (Author/TL)

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Beware of Cultural Clichés!

Some Interesting Findings in the Essays of 1974 and 1975 AATG Travel-Study Trip Applicants

The focus on the teaching of culture within language instruction at all levels has been very pronounced during the past few years. Although most language teachers have probably always integrated language and culture to some extent all of us are making stronger efforts to do it in a more interesting, relevant, appealing way and are thus updating our materials and techniques. Our goal is to present a realistic picture of Germany by which the student can assess contemporary German life. Since this new Landeskunde thrust is of relatively recent date it is yet too early for us to determine how successful we really are in our efforts. What are the students getting out of it? Is the Germany image that develops in their minds consistant with the image we try to portrait? Do the students come to us with fixed stereotypes and clichés which we must remove carefully and are we successful in doing so or do the clichés hang on or surface again now and then? Last not but least are we ourselves possibly biased or victims of clichés and stereotypes?

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Each year a unique opportunity to gain insight into our Landeskunde teaching presents itself to the AATG Award committee members during the selection of finalists. In the Central New

York State region qualifying candidates must write an essay on a given topic and submit to an interview conducted in German. The theme for 1974 was: Sie möchten zwei Monate in einem Ort in der Bundesrepublik verbringen. Welchen Ort suchen Sie sich aus, aus welchen Gründen, und was möchten Sie dort tun?, the theme for 1975: Glauben Sie, dass wesentliche Unterschiede zwischen der deutschen und der amerikanischen Jugend bestehen? Begründen Sie Ihre Antwort! The themes were chosen for their generality and broad appeal and - so we hoped - for their suitability for a limited and general vocabulary. Time allowed was one hour, the length was limited to two singlespaced pages and the use of a dictionary was permitted. Students had no opportunity to discuss the topic with each other.

The feedback gained from these essays can be of great value to teachers of German at all levels, especially since the data at hand is relatively "uncontaminated," i.e. it is not directly influenced by teacher, textbook and/or classmates and is furthermore gathered from several high schools scattered over the Central New York region. In reading the 16 essays the 1974 Awards Committe members were immediately struck by the overwhelming number of students choosing Munich and the Alpine region for their imaginary visit. Some students even steered clear of any city and headed straight for the Alps - this choice being somewhat justified by the word "Ort" in the topic rather than "Stadt." Exceptions in choice were Berlin and the Schwarzwald/Bodensee region. These findings are striking and in need of

analysis. The following points are offered as possible clues for the almost unanimous geographical choice on the part of the students: 1) the existing geographical-cultural cliché of Germany which the student brings to his German studies and which he has acquired "by osmosis" through various sources from early childhood on; 2) the emphasis of the travel and tourist industry over the past decades on certain "picturesque" places in Germany at the expense of others; 3) the romantic phase which American culture and especially American youth has experienced during the last two decades.

Comment to 1). Even a person not studying German and Germany could probably list the following geographical names, probably in the following ranking: Rhine, Heidelberg, Alps, Bavaria, Munich, Berlin, Frankfurt. Beyond these items information would probably cease or be quite mixed. Let us call the names mentioned "archetypal" geographical images of Germany. It is conceivable that under the stress and pressure of an exam situation much of the newly acquired knowledge of German culture tends to be overshadowed by these archetypal features that somehow have become associated solidly with Germany at an early age.

Comment to 2). These archetypal images are constantly reinforced by the travel industry. Particularly effective are the visual reinforcements that penetrate our life in the form of posters and brochures. Although to be fair we must admit that more variety exists among these nowadays, yet there is no denying that a poster of Neuschwanstein against its dramatic

nature setting is more impressive than that of a modern city or of the Lüneburger Heide for the would-be-travellor, seeking the unusual, the exotic. The travel industry capitalizes on dramatic visual materials for obvious reasons and therefore pictures of the Rhine and the Alps - which with the best intentions may also adorn many a classroom - flash through the mind of the student when under pressure to depict a German scene.

Comment to 3). How romantic the American youth has become can best be gleaned from some direct quotations from the essays: "Die Berge in der Nähe von München sind die schönsten in der ganzen Welt. Die schneegekrönten Spitzen reichen zum Himmel mit ihrer majestätischen Schönheit." "Heute wollen viele junge Leute in der ganzen Welt die Natur finden. Die höchste Freude kommt durch Frische und Natur. In meinen Augen sind die Alpen wie ein Märchenland . . . ich habe von Bergsteigen geträumt und möchte auf die Spitze gehen und das Land anschauen." "Ich möchte in die Alpen gehen . . . Die Vögel singen mit süsser Stimme, die Blumen machen die Alpentriften mit ihren leuchtenden Farben wunderbar schön . . . aus der Ferne hört man das Läuten der Kuhglocken. Ich werde auf die höchste Weide wandern mit meinem Rucksack, nur Sonne und Luft als Gesellschaft. Es ist ein Ort, wo man nachdenken kann. Mit dem duftenden Gras um mich herum kommt Friede in die Seele."[1] There can be no doubt that the American youth rebellion of the fifties and sixties against excessive materialism and the longing for a simpler, more natural life style and value system is partly reflected in

these quotations. This now popular life philosophy is then integrated with aspects of German culture such as German romanticism as witnessed through the study of selected poems and the German youth movement of the turn of the century, the Wandervögel, also possibly studied in Landeskunde. In a somewhat simplistic and juvenile fashion this "culture-cake" is then topped with the travel poster Germany image of the Alps as the irresistible icing.

Whereas something is definitely wrong with the teaching of culture that can trigger off such a uniform response (14 out of 16) in the 1974 essays there is no reason to despair because quite a bit was definitely right with the response to the 1975 topic, the comparison between American and German youth. Although only one student stated it explicitly, there was general agreement that the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States are countries with a common heritage, similar present living conditions, and comparable goals for the future. This almost unanimous response (20 out of 22) to a comparison between the two cultures supports Tinsley and Woloshin's statement in a recent UP article: "Since both German and American cultures are Western, the differences are most often in degree or aspect rather than substance."[2] To trace these differences in degree or aspect thus became the true challenge for the essay writers and after the first introductory statement about the similarity of American and German young people most of them proceeded to explain the differences and the group as a whole succeeded in covering most relevant issues such as home life, generation gap, educational system,

typical school day, attitude toward politics, hobbies and cultural interests, and value systems. No question, it was quite a struggle for some of the candidates! To explain the subtle differences between two similar cultures is challenge enough for a well-informed and well-prepared teacher fluent in German, but a truly demanding task for a student with a limited vocabulary under time and exam pressure. In a 60 minute span these young people were trying to come to grips with questions of contrastive culture raised anew by John Troyanovich in 1972 and many others since then.[3]

Although many aspects were touched upon by the students, the topic most widely discussed (12 out of 22) was that of family life and here differences of opinion were the rule. The majority viewed family life as closer, parents as stricter, and respect toward one's elders as deeper as can be seen from the following quotations: "In Deutschland sind die Eltern strenger. Sie verlangen Respekt. Da die Familie eng zusammenlebt, bekommen die Eltern den Respekt." "Das Leben in der Schule und zu Hause ist sehr streng und darum benimmt sich die Jugend besser als die amerikanische." But then there were opposing views: "Zu Hause haben die jungen Menschen dieselben Konflikte mit ihren Eltern wie die amerikanischen." "Die jungen Leute streiten mit ihren Eltern über Geld und Kleider in Deutschland und Amerika." "Sie haben alle dieselben Probleme durch ihre Eltern." And finally the somewhat stereotyped patriarchal versus matriarchal social structure found expression: "In vielen amerikanischen Familien entscheidet die Mutter alles, was geschehen muss. In

Deutschland macht der Vater die wichtigen Entscheidungen für die ganze Familie." These mixed responses reflect the present situation in Germany with regard to changes in family life and structure and are thus evidence of a realistic Germany image. The mixed responses are also an indication of the fact that social institutions are usually not fixed but in flux. We know that the patriarchal structure still prevails in many families but that the stereotype of the tyrant-father is dying a slow death - but what is more, our students seem to know something about it, too.

The 1975 essays reflect fairly successful teaching of German culture. But in view of the clichéed contents of the 1974 essays we can hardly afford to sit back and relax. We must constantly be on the alert against personal biases, biased textbooks, and last but not least the biases which the beginning language students bring to the classroom. This does not mean that we must develop deep guilt complexes about any stereotyping activity. Stereotyping is a common social phenomonon and persons from all educational levels engage in it. It is one of man's attemps to order the world around him into categories and is not harmful as long as he is aware of its pitfalls and dangers. A certain amount of stereotyping in contrastive culture studies is probably even helpful in the beginning, but the teacher must be conscious of it and develop an awareness of it in the students also. Removing or correcting stereotypes and clichés is probably our most difficult task because they tend to be so deeply ingrained.

In the case of German culture this task is a truly difficult one since the Student Prince-Loreley-Sauerkraut image of Germany is a very popular one, as Helmut Partecke stated so rightly[4] and as borne out once again in a recent article in Die Zeit "Bilanz des Oktoberfestes, Schwitzbad und Paradies."[5] In the conclusion the author expresses his concern as follows: "So kann es nicht ausbleiben, dass im Bewusstsein des durchschnittlichen Weltbürgers . . . das Bild der Bundesrepublik Deutschland immer mehr die Züge des Münchner Oktoberfestes annimmt. . . . Die Goethe-Institute werden es nicht leicht haben, unseren ausländischen Freunden klarzumachen, dass dieses Oktoberfest nur der Höhepunkt des Kirchenjahres der internationalen München-Verehrung ist, zwar verwandt, aber nicht identisch mit Deutschland." However, if we take away the "good old Germany" image with beer songs, dirndl dresses, Octoberfests and the standard trip down the Rhine, then on to Heidelberg, Munich and the Alps, what is left to attract student and tourist alike? It is therefore extremely important that we do not go overboard in the opposite direction and deemphasize this "good old Germany" image too much, indeed, if we did, we would become guilty of counterstereotyping for this image is not false, it is merely incomplete. It is also relatively easy to absorb, unproblematic, esthetically and socially appealing to many and seems to represent the "exotic," folkloristic elements of German culture which the student or travellor cherishes to fulfill some romantic-nostalgic yearning and give relief from the everyday, mundane

and trivial. It can be a big drawing card in the classroom and, if handled properly, does not have to lead to misrepresentation of the culture.

But neither must it be overemphasized. What is needed is a "mixed diet," a proper balance of all aspects with something for everybody, maybe even at the expense of in-depth-coverage of some areas. Such an approach will guarantee maximum student interest and involvement by turning noone off and will promote a Germany image that does justice to all aspects of the culture. The essays discussed have provided us with some valuable feedback. It is now up to us to use this information for the correction, adjustment, and updating of our materials and approaches in the teaching of German culture.

Notes

[1]These quotations have been edited to the extent that glaring grammatical and stylistic errors have been removed.

[2]Royal L. Tinsley, Jr. and David J.Woloshin, "Approaching German Culture: A Tentative Analysis," Die Unterrichtspraxis, VII, 1 (1974), 125-136.

[3]John Troyanovich, "American Meets German - Cultural Shock in the Classroom," Die Unterrichtspraxis, V, 2 (1972), 67-79.

[4]Helmut Partecke, "German Gymnasium Teacher Meets U.S. High School - Cultural Shock in the Classroom," Die Unterrichtspraxis, VI, 2 (1973), 99-103.

[5]Christian Schütze, "Bilanz des Oktoberfestes, Schwitzbad und Paradies," Die Zeit, Nr. 42 (1975).